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ABSTRACT

A study is reported that aimed to: (1) assess perceived needs of Japanese language by students and business faculty; (2) assess Japanese language needs of business professionals who work with Japan; (3) determine what language abilities and levels of proficiency are desired; and (4) identify perceived problem areas and ways that they are handled by business professionals. The study was conducted at the University of Texas at Austin, where approximately 3 percent of the first-year Japanese students are in liberal arts fields and the rest are majoring in business, technical, and other fields. Data were gathered by a questionnaire survey from 162 subjects categorized as Japanese language students, university faculty in the business field, and Texas business professionals. A majority (70 percent) of the business professionals interviewed speak Japanese, and most of them had lived in Japan for several years. The results of the study show that business professionals, students, and faculty support the notion that students preparing for a career including international activity should include language study as part of their preparation. Other observations are that the need is not being well met by current course offerings, that interdisciplinary programming is necessary to teach "real world" experiences, that most Japanese faculty lack real world experience, and that Japanese study does not yet enhance job prospects since the primary hiring criteria continue to be skill and experience. Contains 11 references. (LB)

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ASSESSING JAPANESE LANGUAGE NEEDS FOR BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL USE

Eleventh Annual EMU Conference on Languages and Communication for World Business and The Professions

March 26th, 1992

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Assessing Japanese Language Needs for Business and Professional Use

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Objectives of This Study

The objectives of this study are (1) to assess perceived needs of Japanese language by students and business faculty and (2) to assess Japanese language needs of business professionals who work with Japan. Further, (3) to determine what language abilities and levels of proficiency are desired and finally, (4) what problem areas are perceived by business professionals and how are they handled. The background for this study is the dramatic world-wide increase in the number of new students enrolling in Japanese language programs and the recently increased awareness of the need to compete in a global market.

Background of This Study

A recent survey by the Modern Language Association of America (1991) stated that enrollment in Japanese classes has increased by 94.9 % from 23,454 in 1986 to 45,717 in the Fall of 1990, an increase greater than that of any other foreign language. According to the results of a survey conducted by The National Foreign Language Center, this dramatic increase in popularity seems to be explained by students' strong instrumental motivations. Jorden and Lambert (1991) reported that students' principal motivations are, aside from interest in Japan and being able to speak fluently, improving their job opportunities and being able to use job-related Japanese. This shift of focus to an interest in business related future opportunities on the part of contemporary Japanese students is at least partially explained by examining changes in the source of students.

Saito (1991) examined the source of the present population of Japanese language students at The University of Texas at Austin, and reported that approximately 38 % of the first year Japanese students are from the Liberal Arts College and the rest are majoring in business, technical and other fields. In the

second year, the proportion of Liberal Arts students decreases while the proportion of business, technical, and "other" students increases. Students from business, technical, and "other" fields are continuing into the second year while significant numbers of Liberal Arts students drop out of the program. Aida's study (1990) gave some insight into this phenomenon.

Aida compared the overall performance of second year Japanese language students and their fields of study. She found that Business students perform at a significantly higher level than Liberal Arts students. She noted that high motivation and high GPA entrance requirements for the Business College are probably important explanatory factors. Saito also noted in her study that only half of the first year students who are taking Japanese for their language requirement stay in the program, but a high percentage of those students who choose to study Japanese as an elective continue into the third year. Students who are taking Japanese as an elective typically are taking Japanese in addition to any degree or program requirement.

In the past, the majority of students who studied Japanese came from a liberal arts tradition and often entered a discipline such as Japanese linguistics or literature or a related field such as Asian Studies. Recently, however, Japanese programs have been inundated by large numbers of students from outside disciplines such as business, engineering, law, and scientific or technical fields. These students are now in the majority and career related effective communicative skills are their primary objectives.

There have been a number of studies to investigate the foreign language needs of U.S. corporations in this era of increasingly global competition (Clifford & Fischer, 1990; Fixman, 1990; Gillespie, 1985; Inman, 1978). There is, however, a difference in the order of magnitude when one steps out of the family of Western / European languages and cultures and attempts to grasp Japan, one of the most insular of the Asian cultures. Therefore, this study specifically focuses on Japanese language needs for business and professional use in U.S.-based corporations.

Method

Subjects

Data were obtained from a total of 162 subjects from three different groups: Japanese language students (S) and faculty members in Business College (F) at the University of Texas at Austin, and business professionals (B) in central Texas. Among 162 subjects, 63 were students enrolled in advanced level Japanese language courses, 72 were faculty in Business College from International Business and other business disciplines, and 27 were business professionals (B) who are currently working with Japan.

Among students, 62% of the total students were seniors, 17% were juniors and 21% were graduate students. Regarding their major fields, 70% of the students were in business fields and 30% were in Liberal Arts and technical fields. In terms of their language backgrounds, 78% have learned two to three foreign languages, and 21% have studied more than three foreign languages. 48% of the students have studied language more than five years. In the business faculty, 97% have studied foreign languages, 39% of them studied just one foreign language and 28% studied two languages while 28% have studied three or more foreign languages. About 40% of the total faculty have been in Japan.

A majority (70%) of the business professionals interviewed speak Japanese but the rest of them have no Japanese language ability. Two-thirds of the business professionals who speak Japanese ranked themselves as having intermediate or higher levels of Japanese ability and have lived in Japan for several years. Business professionals were drawn from a list of companies in the American Southwest dealing with Japan that was published by JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization) in 1990. Over 90% of the selected business professionals work for high-tech electronics firms.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were obtained from both faculty and students by means of a questionnaire. The instrument was developed with input from foreign language and business educators and pretested by administering it to 20 upper division Japanese language students. Using results of the pretest, appropriate revisions were made to

the instrument. Data obtained from business professionals were collected through personal interviews because of the depth and nature of the data sought. The protocols (lists of questions) for these interviews were also pretested with three business professionals and appropriate revisions were made. Each interview was recorded with the subject's permission and transcribed afterward for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Chi-square statistical analysis was used to analyze the data from the surveys of students and faculty and from the taped interviews conducted with business professionals. Furthermore, data which were non-quantifiable were analyzed qualitatively.

Results

Perceived Advantage of Foreign Language Ability

In order to find out what career value respondents placed on language study, respondents were asked if they thought language ability would give an advantage? The students and faculty members overwhelmingly endorsed the notion that foreign language ability would have a positive impact on hiring decisions (see Table 1, Section A). Almost all the students and the business faculty seem to think that good foreign language ability will give some advantage over students who have no language skills. When asked why foreign language ability would give an advantage, students and faculty wrote in their own reasons.

Insert Table 1 about here

The responses were varied but generally fell into the areas listed in Table 1, Section B. Just over a third of the students indicated that the acquisition of cultural knowledge was the most important benefit or advantage derived from language study, and secondly, becoming more competitive in the job market because of the globalizastion of business. Business faculty indicated that adapting to compete in the global environment and being more competitive in the job market were the major benefits of language study.

Business people's responses were substantially different from students and faculty. While three out of five stated that Japanese language ability could be an important factor in a hiring decision, the remainder, about 40%, said that other skills would be more important. Business managers stated that they would probably hire for a perceived need or job description seeking management experience and/or technical qualification, e.g. MBA or EE degree, *with* experience. Having found persons who have the qualities they were seeking, then having Japanese language ability would be an attractive additional talent. In that case it might be the deciding factor in a hiring decision.

Using A Translator

When asked if it was more appropriate for business people to use a translator than for them to learn the foreign language themselves, over 85% of both students and faculty rejected the suggestion of using a translator. Business professionals, however, responded that 43% would rely upon translators while 57% stated that they would prefer not to have to rely upon translators. When asked why they should attempt to master the foreign language, students and faculty gave their own reasons as shown in Table 2, Section B. Their responses were generally weighted toward the first three reasons, essentially focus on accuracy of communications.

Insert Table 2 about here

Language Abilities Needed for International Careers

Respondents were also asked what language abilities and proficiency levels are important for business and professional use in a global market. The data in Table 3 indicates that the highest value is placed on cultural knowledge by all groups of respondents, students, faculty, and business people.

Insert Table 3 about here

As in Figure 1, conversational ability (speaking and listening) rated a strong second and literacy skills were ranked third (Graphics 1, 2, 3, 4, & 5) . Interestingly, business professionals and students placed higher value on conversation skills than faculty members. This would seem to indicate that students' aspirations are more closely in tune with the reality being lived by the business people.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Language Proficiency Levels Needed for International Careers

Respondents were asked about the desired proficiency level of Japanese ability for a successful career in international business dealing with Japan. The results were quite similar to the preceding question about desired language skills, the main difference being the insistence of the management respondents on high standards in all areas. This is especially pronounced in the literacy areas where nearly one in three indicated that they felt fluency should be the objective. Conversational proficiency was more highly valued by the business professionals and the students than faculty respondents. Here again, management respondents tended to require fluency much more strongly than either students or faculty.

Thorough cultural knowledge was the most highly desired ability by all classes of respondents. Managers indicated by a ratio of three to two that depth in cultural knowledge was essential for those seeking an international career. Students' goals in acquiring cultural knowledge more closely matched the professionals than did faculty members only one in three of whom indicated they felt the necessity for such great depth of cultural understanding.

Insert Table 4 about here

In order to gain more specific information on the desired language skills, respondents were asked about being able to discuss professional topics, conduct negotiations, and read documents in Japanese. A high percentage from both student and faculty groups seem to think that sufficient language ability to be able to talk about professional and business topics should be acquired from the business

language class (Figure 2). This response by the faculty group is not consistent with their response as shown in Table 3 and 4, where the faculty placed relatively low value on conversational skills. Business respondents, on the other hand, placed very high value on the ability to discuss professional topics.

Insert Figure 2 about here

The ability to negotiate can be viewed as variation on the "professional fluency" topic presented in the Figure 2. "Negotiations" were never defined in the survey, so it was left up to the respondent to understand just what this term meant. Compared with faculty groups, students seem to have very high expectations (Figure 3). Students desire to acquire sufficient language ability to negotiate by a ratio of five to one. Overall, faculty members seemed to reject the notion of acquiring sufficient language ability to negotiate. This again seems to be inconsistent with the value placed on the ability to discuss professional topics (Figure 2) by the same faculty members. The reasons for these inconsistancies may have to do with the term "negotiate."

Insert Figure 3 about here

When responses of business people are taken into consideration, the ability to conduct business negotiations in Japanese becomes a definite advantage. About two thirds (65%) of the business people surveyed stated that the ability to negotiate was desirable, compared with 82% of students and 46% of faculty. The response to this question is interesting because it is so uniform; all respondent groups, business, students, and faculty, seemed to think that the ability to understand business newspapers, faxes, or reports is very important. Compared to the more general question about desired reading proficiency, Table 4, this question is much more precisely targeted on an obvious and pragmatic need for reading skill.

Insert Figure 4 about here

Summary of Findings

(1) Perceived needs of Japanese language by students and business faculty

Both students and faculty have very high perceived needs of Japanese language in the professions. Most students are taking Japanese as an elective and as part of their own professional development objectives. They seem to have an emotional investment in mastering and using Japanese in their future. Accordingly, they place a high value on communicative ability and cultural understanding of Japanese society. Faculty, on the other hand are more objective. While they place value on both communicative skills and cultural knowledge, they don't seem to share the passion for success in Japanese that the students have.

(2) Japanese language needs of business professionals

A total of 70 % of the business people who actually deal with Japan have relatively high Japanese language abilities. Yet, they feel their Japanese language abilities are not good enough to be able to conduct business in Japanese. They tend to rely on their counterparts' English abilities even though they experience some misunderstandings which mostly come from different expectations and practices related to different cultural backgrounds. Their primary use of Japanese seems to be in building and maintaining personal relationships with Japanese counterparts. This coupled with their ability to freely and effectively function in Japan is a cornerstone of their careers.

(3) Desired Japanese language abilities and levels of proficiency

Students, faculty and business people all place very high value on having good cultural knowledge. Students' expectations of achieving communicative competence, particularly in speaking and listening, is very close to the needs expressed by business people. Students who are currently spending their time learning language seem to have a strong desire to utilize this ability in their future and want to be well-prepared for possible opportunities. Business people based in the U.S. who are struggling to satisfy their Japanese language needs seem to

express a wishful desire to have good communicative competence, but their needs (pressure) are not as strong when compared with business people who live and work in Japan.

Although faculty placed lower values on language abilities of speaking, listening, reading and writing, compared to the other two groups, they placed equally high value on specific abilities such as being able to speak about professional topics or to read newspapers or professional journal articles. The contradictory result is probably coming from the faculty's academic orientation.

(4) Perceived language problems by business people

Business respondents were asked about language related aspects of their work; specifically, did they use Japanese or English or a mixture of both? Did they experience language/culture related business problems, and if so, what were they? And finally, what is the value of studying Japanese in terms of job prospects for college graduates?

Two thirds of the management people rated themselves as capable to fluent in Japanese and said that they used this ability in their work. Business communications were conducted exclusively in English by 48% of the firms, in both Japanese and English by 48%, and exclusively in Japanese by 4% of the responding firms.

When asked about problems, 54% said they had no problems while 46% expressed concerns such as frustration (15%), feeling at a disadvantage (23%), and distrust (8%). Those communicating entirely or primarily in English realized that they were dependent upon their Japanese business associates' English ability. Some selected comments were, "...cultural misunderstanding can occur even with a translator", "...not sure his English is understood, try again, show-examples", "*...it is*...frustrating to sit in a room with a lot of Japanese and not understand what they're talking about, *...and you* try not to be left out, but *you* learn to put up with it", "*..it is* difficult to understand the Japanese way of thinking", "...humor is impossible", "... if English wouldn't do they don't deal."

In reviewing the taped interviews, the sense of frustration was almost tangible, but it is impossible to pinpoint causes and solutions since these situations invariably involve personal relationships that cross both language and cultural

barriers. Further, there is the fact that on both sides there are substantial human organizations behind the contact people.

Discussion

There is a significant need for "Professional" Japanese type of curricula. With about two out of three Japanese language students coming from either a business or a scientific / technical discipline, it is clear that their objectives are somewhat more pragmatic than those anticipated in a traditional Japanese language and literature curriculum. This high proportion of professional students has propelled the overall growth of Japanese enrollments for the past decade. A fact that is especially noteworthy when one considers that their major programs are very busy and leave little time for studying Japanese. Clearly these students have career objectives that anticipate interaction with Japanese counterparts and they need an efficient, functional curriculum. Further, since only half of all Japanese language students have formulated their objectives early enough to select Japanese as a language requirement, these students, too, might well benefit from a more tightly focused curriculum that would bring them to communicative competence more quickly.

Recent articles in the Wall Street Journal (8/21/91) and Fortune (8/91) emphasized both the desire of MBA students to study a useful foreign language and their relative lack of available time to do so. Japanese is the first choice of these hyper-ambitious students. Students are constantly asking for some way to reduce their (calendar) time and increase the utility of their Japanese course work. In fact, the Katz school of Business at Pittsburgh is even offering a three week Japanese course. It is clear that a curriculum designed to meet their needs would be well received. It is encouraging to note that in a recent Trend Letter (1/23/92) John Naisbett reported that a number of prominent business schools are experimenting with new programs, some of which are along these lines.

All respondents expressed a high desire for communicative competence. In terms of language skills these students want to be able to communicate with their Japanese contemporaries. This is primarily manifested in a desire for conversational skills. The high desirability for literacy skills expressed by faculty

seemed to be a generalized (foreign language) response without consideration for the inherent difficulty in mastering written Japanese. Of the international managers 70% are at least moderately fluent in Japanese, and based on their own experience, over 60% stressed the need for literacy skills.

Depth in cultural knowledge was the most desired outcome from foreign language study. All respondents expressed a desire to acquire as much depth in cultural knowledge as possible. This is probably based on the notion that even though one may have difficulty mastering a foreign language, still it is possible to study *about* the foreign people and culture in one's native language. Indeed there is a great body of cultural literature about Japan and the Japanese in English, but most teachers of Japanese are themselves Japanese and have not been exposed to this body of literature. This points to the need to consider development of an inter-disciplinary curriculum to integrate cultural knowledge with language study.

Conclusions

The results of this study show that business professionals, students and faculty support the notion that students preparing for or desiring a career including international activity should include language study as part of their preparation. One thing that emerges from the research and the literature is the growing awareness that while there is a great demand for language for specific purposes such as Business Japanese, that need is not being well met by current course offerings. This clearly points to a need to develop interdisciplinary programming and to involve outside "real world" experiences such as internships and seminars with guests from business and industry.

A parallel observation would have to be that the Japanese faculty, also, has little idea of what to incorporate in Business Japanese course. A major reason for this is that most Japanese professors are primarily academics without real world experience in either corporate Japan or corporate America. Also, they are mostly native Japanese who have made their homes here and brought their talent to many American colleges and universities, but they (we) lack the ability to be as objective about Japan as the non-Japanese specialist on Japan.

Finally, with respect to Japanese study for enhancing one's job prospects, that seems to be an illusion. The primary hiring criteria are skill and experience, language ability is a bonus for the employer. This observation, however, is historical and dates from a time when very few American students learned Japanese and prior to Japan's emergence as an economic superpower. Today Japanese programs are greatly expanded and students are career focused. Students seem to realize that this focus is of strategic importance to both their own and America's economic future. The impact of increasing numbers of college graduates with Japanese training is yet to be felt in American business and industry.

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Table 1

Perceived Advantage and The Value of Foreign Language Ability

Question: Do students with good foreign language ability have some advantage over students who have no language skills?

A	Response	S	F	B
	No	4%	4%	37%
	Yes	96%	96%	63%

B	Reasons of Value of Language Study	S	F
	1. To adapt and compete in the global environment	15%	27%
	2. Essential for negotiations, communication, interaction, direct dealings	19%	13%
	3. Better understanding of culture, traditions, customs, relations	35%	18%
	4. More competitive in the job market because of the globalization of business	22%	26%
	5. Others	10%	16%

Table 2

Using a Translator and Reasons to Master a Foreign Language

It has been suggested that business people should not attempt to master the foreign language, rather study the culture and customs and use a translator.

A	Response	S	F	B
	Agree	11%	14%	57%
	Disagree	89%	85%	43%

B	Reasons	S	F
	1. There is a loss of meaning in translation	13%	17%
	2. Language is helpful as well	24%	10%
	3. Both the language and culture & customs are essential	46%	39%
	4. Culture and customs are more important than language Communication enhanced w/ interpreter	8%	1%
	5. Language not that important, cannot "master" a language	0%	10%
	6. Better to use a translator	0%	1%
	7. Others	8%	21%

Table 3

Importance of Language Abilities

Rank order: 3 (very important), 2 (somewhat important), 1 (not important at all)

	Rank order	B	S	F
Speaking ability	3	61	56	37
	2	22	39	47
	1	17	5	16
	Chi-square = 14.514, d.f. = 4, p = 0.036			
Listening ability	3	61	69	43
	2	22	29	47
	1	17	2	10
	Chi-square = 10.249, d.f. = 4, p = 0.006			
Writing ability	3	26	15	13
	2	35	67	37
	1	39	18	50
	Chi-square = 10.864, d.f. = 4, p = 0.001			
Reading ability	3	39	26	21
	2	26	59	47
	1	34	14	32
	Chi-square = 18.415, d.f. = 4, p = 0.028			
Cultural knowledge				
	3	74	75	79
	2	17	19	16
	1	9	3	4
	Not significant			

Table 4

Desired Language Proficiency Level

Proficiency scale: 5 (fluent), 4 (intermediate fluency: three to four years study), 3 (low level fluency: four semester study), 2 (survival language skills: one semester study), and 1 (no proficiency)

	B	S	F
Speaking ability			
5	43	25	11
4	17	49	12
3	22	19	47
2	4	7	27
1	13	0	3

Chi-square = 53.367, d.f. = 8, p = 0.000

	B	S	F
Listening ability			
5	43	29	15
4	17	46	15
3	22	18	45
2	4	7	21
1	13	0	3

Chi-square = 40.557, d.f. = 8, p = 0.000

	B	S	F
Writing ability			
5	26	4	6
4	9	29	3
3	26	47	24
2	9	17	38
1	30	3	29

Chi-square = 51.122, d.f. = 8, p = 0.000

	B	S	F
Reading ability			
5	30	5	9
4	13	37	8
3	22	41	23
2	9	17	39
1	26	0	21

Chi-square = 51.122, d.f. = 8, p = 0.000

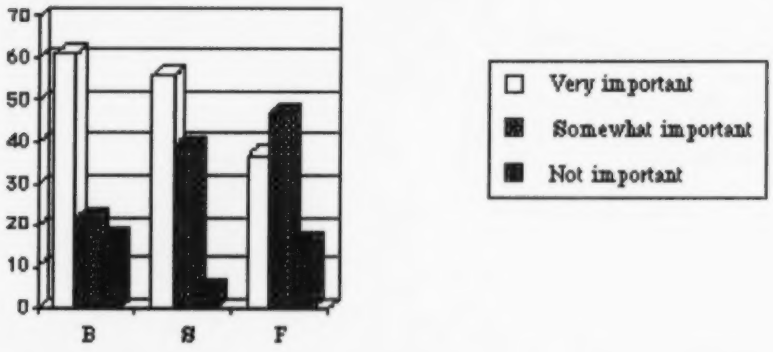
Cultural knowledge			
5	57	50	28
4	18	27	31
3	17	14	22
2	4	7	14
1	4	2	5

Chi-square = not significant

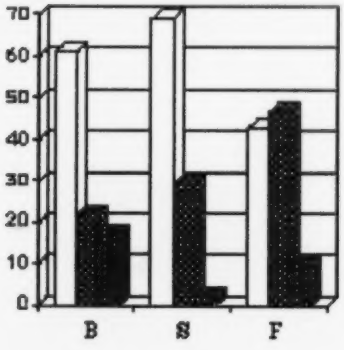
Figure Captions

Figure 1. Importance of language abilities

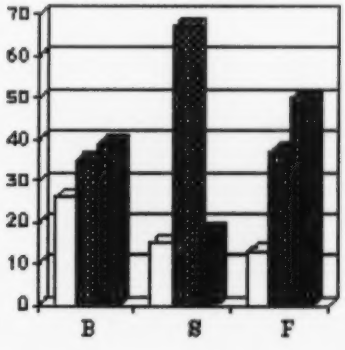
Graphic 1: Speaking Ability



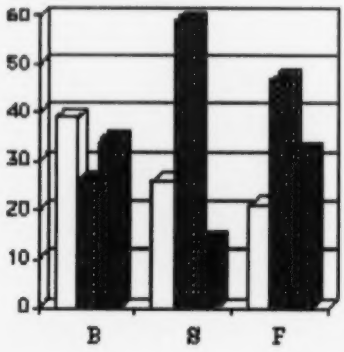
Graphic 2: Listening Ability



Graphic 3: Writing Ability



Graphic 4: Reading Ability



Graphic 5: Cultural knowledge

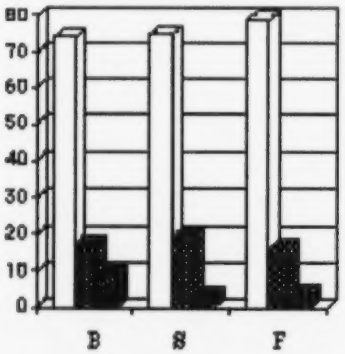
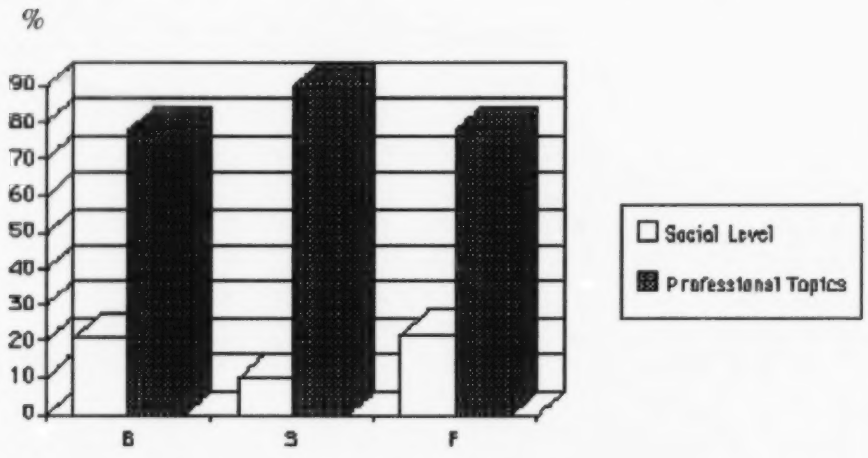


Figure Caption

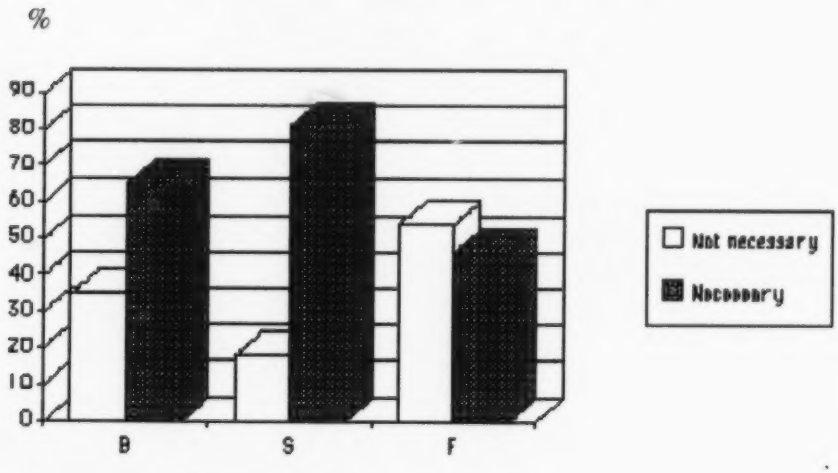
Figure 2. Desired ability to discuss professional topics



Chi-square = 3.910, d.f. = 2, p = 0.142

Figure Caption

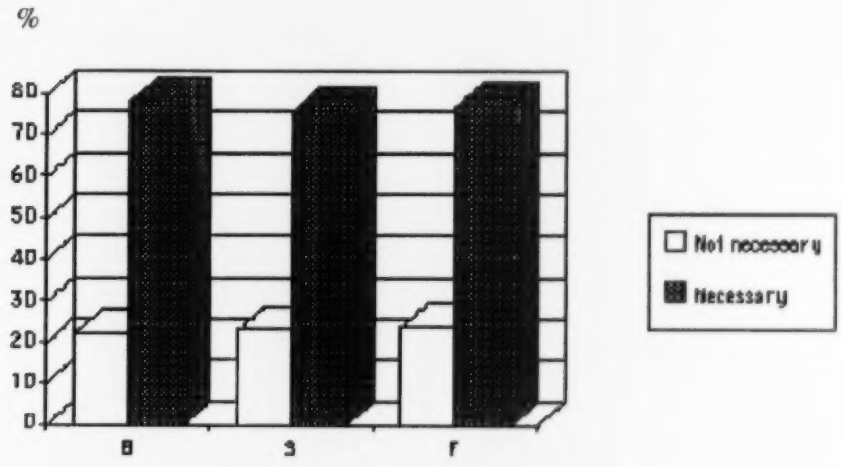
Figure 3. Desired ability to conduct negotiations



Chi-square = 17.712, d.f. = 2, p = 0.000

Figure Caption

Figure 4. Expectation of developing ability to read business newspapers, faxes, messages and reports.



Chi-square = 0.052, d.f. = 2, p = 0.975